

Applying to Graduate School From A Student's Perspective



by Robert McClure, DMA Candidate

Who am I?

I am a third year doctoral candidate at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. I obtained a master's degree in Music Composition from the University of Arizona. I have had a rather unique experience when applying to graduate programs. Some of my friends in the field have applied to five or more graduate programs before finally selecting a school. I took, perhaps, a more risky path on the way to graduate school. I only applied to two programs for a master's degree and only one program for doctoral work. While this is certainly not the norm, it worked for me. There were several key factors that played into being accepted and (more importantly) financially supported at these institutions.

How to decide whether or not to go to grad school?

The biggest question I had to ask myself after I obtained a bachelor's degree in music education was what are my career options with just this degree? Then, do those options match my interests and career goals? While I had acceptable career options stemming from my undergraduate work, my ultimate goal of becoming more than an amateur composer would go unfulfilled.

My undergraduate degree prepared me for a secondary education teaching position, most likely in a band or orchestra. During the middle of this degree my teaching focus shifted to composition. As few composition jobs are available without, at the very least, a master's degree or, more commonly, a doctorate in the field, my choice to attend graduate school was very clear. But, your choice might not be so clear. So, here are some questions to answer to help with the decision whether or not grad school is right for you?

1. What are my career goals?
2. Can I achieve them with my present level or education?
3. Will this degree allow me to more effectively market myself and make me more appealing as a candidate in a job search?
4. Can I spend another 2-6 years living as a student?

This last question is something to be heavily considered. Life as a graduate student, while rich in educational opportunities, leaves you very poor financially.

While the majority of students go to graduate school having their tuition and fees waived by the institution and some receive stipends effectively paying them to go to school, there are other costs while attending graduate school such as mandatory insurance, transportation, travel and lodging for attending conferences, rent and utilities, and general living expenses. The other cost to consider is that of moving potentially 2-3 times within a 8-10 year period. Before committing to graduate school, it is necessary to consider the cost : worth ratio, especially including the non-tangibles such as how this choice might effect current or potential personal relationships.

What should I look for in a program?

I first narrowed down schools based on geographic location. My wife and I wanted to move to the southwest (this is another factor to consider, where you will be living).

When I began looking at schools in the region, I looked at the professors with whom I would be working. I listened to their music and read about them. It was important for me that my interests intersected with theirs' but did not run parallel. I found that I learned a great deal from one of my professors despite our dissimilar interests.

Also, while it was important for me to enjoy their compositions, it was more important for me to assess their personality and teaching style before I committed to working with them. It has been my experience that professors are very willing to make appointments with potential students (its part of their job). These appointments can be very useful in determining how well you will be able to work with this person.

I visited one of my potential master's degree programs and had a several meetings with the composition faculty only to find a very cold and unwelcoming attitude. While this was my first choice school, this revelation was very useful. Just because a certain school may look great on paper doesn't mean it is the right place for you. Grad school is hard. You don't need to make it harder on yourself by attending a school you will ultimately be unhappy with due to personality conflicts or ideological disconnects.

During my master's degree, one of the Rice Faculty Composers visited for a master class on his music. Listening to his lecture and his music impressed me. Two weeks later, when the news of a doctoral position at Rice was announced, I leapt at the opportunity because of the great experience I'd already had in meeting him and hearing his ideas.

The Application Process

Don't kid yourself. This will take a long time. Be organized and you can cut down on the time spent on the application. You can often reuse or modify part of one application for another. Take particular care in writing your Personal Statement that most grad schools require. These are read and they do matter to the application. Just as students are looking for the school that fits them best, schools are looking for the people that will work well within their program. They aren't looking for only for the highest test scores or GPA. They are looking for people and the Personal Statement is an area were you can stand above the rest.

These applications can be expensive (\$50 or more) so only apply to the schools you actually want to attend. Once the application is finished - send it and forget it. There is no sense in torturing yourself every time you look in the mailbox for a response. Grad schools will usually contact you, one way or another, by February. Decisions have to be made by the middle of April. This allows them enough time to schedule interviews or campus visits with you.

The Interview

The interview is where you can really set yourself apart from the other candidates. Programs receive hundreds of applications from students and they all appear very similar on paper. Based on qualifications, work samples, and research, the program will select a group to interview. As I said before, these programs are looking for the right person not the right numbers.

It is important to be well-informed for the interview. Have enough information about the professors and the program to show them that you have researched but you should also have about 3-5 specific questions. If you don't ask questions, you are telling the interviewer that you aren't interested in knowing anything about the program and ultimately you aren't interested in attending the school.

You should maintain a positive attitude when speaking of past experiences, schools, or professors. This shows professionalism. Programs want to produce the finest professionals possible. This skill shows you are well on your way.

Be prepared to maintain a high level of energy throughout the interview(s). It will be very tiring. But this factor contributes to the atmosphere of the interview. Energy is contagious and by having a high energy level you can control or at least influence the tone of the interview.

The interview was by far the most important aspect of both of my graduate school applications. For my master's degree, I had a phone interview with my eventual primary professor. This interview was extremely important because despite having a bachelor's in music, I'd never taken a course in composition. All of the compositions I sent as my portfolio were written as a hobby. This interview allowed me to explain what the application did not. And because of that phone interview, I was accepted and received scholarships. The interview for my doctoral degree consisted of an hour and a half with my primary professor and half an hour with the head of the composition department. This was for a TA position at Rice. Maintaining a high level of energy was incredibly important because not only were they looking for a student, but they were also looking for an interesting and engaging teacher.

Your interpersonal skills are very useful and important when it comes to interviewing. Your credentials may get you in the door, but once you are in you have to connect with the people interviewing you.

"Congratulations! You've been accepted..."

This should be a great feeling! Being accepted to grad school is a long and arduous process. Schools have the ability to be very selective with their graduate programs due to the fact that the majority of their revenue does not stem from graduate tuition. You should be proud of the fact that you were selected from a pool of hundreds of applicants. But, now the real work begins! Dig in and good luck!